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XXI.—*On some Remarkable Archaeological Discoveries in Ireland.* By EUGENE ALFRED CONWELL, Esq.

[*Read June 26th, 1866.*]

ON the 26th of February last, Eugene Alfred Conwell, Esq., of Trim, Co. Meath, Inspector of National Schools under the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, British Association, and several other learned societies, read a paper before the Royal Irish Academy, in Dublin, on his recent examination of the sepulchral cairns on the Loughcrew hills, County of Meath, Ireland, which embraced a minute account of thirty-one partially destroyed cairns, extending along a range of hills, two miles in extent, overlooking the beautiful demesne of Loughcrew, and about two miles distant from the town of Oldcastle.

These ancient sepulchral remains, which had hitherto escaped all previous observation and description, are said to surpass in point of magnificence, number, and quaint ornamentation, anything of the kind yet discovered in Western Europe. Mr. Conwell acknowledged the debt of gratitude which British archæologists owe to J. L. W. Naper, Esq., D. L., Loughcrew, the lord of the soil, and to his agent, Charles W. Hamilton, Esq., J.P., for the indispensable aid which they supplied in labour during his researches, and for the interest and zeal which they evinced in the careful exploration of the place. The internal arrangement of the chambers is, for the most part, cruciform, the shaft representing the entrance passage, and the termination of the arms, the small cists, from four to five feet square, arranged round the central chamber, roofed by large overlapping flags, and the whole being surmounted by a pyramid of dry loose stones. The three largest cairns were surrounded, at a few yards distance, by others of smaller dimensions; and in the larger ones the slabs, measuring from six to twelve feet long, which formed the periphery of the base of each cairn, were found to converge inwards towards a point indicating the mouth or entrance of the passage, which generally pointed in the direction of east, or a few degrees north or south of east.

The most common style of sculpturing on the inscribed chamber-stones was punched work, executed by a metallic tool; but there are also examples of chiselled work and scraped work. Though the carved stones exceed one hundred in number, there are not two the decorations on which are similar. On the

stones which have been long exposed to the destructive effects of the atmosphere, the punched or other work is often much obliterated ; but on those lately exposed the work of the tool is almost as fresh and as distinct as at the period of its execution.

At what remote, or even recent, period these ancient tombs have been subjected to demolition, it would be difficult to determine. Mr. Conwell, however, has heard from old men who were engaged at the work of exploration, that they recollected, before quarries were generally opened in the country, that persons were in the habit of coming from twenty to thirty miles round about, to procure from these archaic structures slabs suitable for domestic or other purposes. Of what now remains, deprived of most of the roofing-slabs, the inscriptions on the sculptured chamber-stones in thirteen cairns in the entire range may be thus summarised :—406 single cup like hollows, some arranged in parallel lines, some in circles, and many of them scattered in groups ; 86 cups, each surrounded by a single circle ; 30, by two circles ; 17, by three circles ; 4, by four circles ; 3, by five circles ; 4 cup-hollows, each surrounded by a spiral ; 35 star-shaped figures, varying from four to thirteen rays in each ; 22 circles, with rays emanating from each ; 14 cups, each surrounded by a circle, with rays emanating from it ; 16 single ovals ; 1 figure of two concentric ovals ; 1 of six ; 114 single circles ; 32 figures of two concentric circles ; 10 of three ; 6 of four ; 4 of five ; 1 of six ; 68 semi-elliptical, or arched figures ; 12 spirals ; 14 quadrilateral figures ; 6 triangular figures, formed by cross-hatched lines ; 54 reticulated figures, consisting, in all, of 138 diamonds ; nearly 300 single straight lines, some of which may probably be oghamic ; upwards of 80 zig-zag, or chevron lines ; 10 single curves ; 11 figures of two concentric curves ; 10 of three ; 8 of four ; 4 of five ; 4 of six ; 20 of seven ; 1 of eight ; 1 of nine ; and 2 of thirteen concentric curves. In all, so far as the explorations have gone, Mr. Conwell has laid bare 1393 separate devices, which will be found to be many times more than had been previously supposed to exist in Ireland ; and these chiefly in the sepulchral chambers at Dowth, Knowth, and New Grange.

Some remarkable stone basins, or urns, have been found. One oval one is deserving of especial notice, being probably the largest yet discovered in a cairn, and almost double the size of the much celebrated ones at New Grange. It has been tooled or picked with exquisite care, and a raised rim, varying from two to four inches in width, runs all round the otherwise perfectly level surface of the stone. The broader end points to the east, the narrower to the west. Its greatest length is 5 feet 9 inches. At a distance of 18 inches from the narrower extremity it is 3 feet 1 inch broad, and at 18 inches from the other extremity

it is 7 inches broader, having on its southern side a curve of about 4 inches in breadth, scooped out of the side of the stone.

The following is a summary of the principal articles found :—A bead and pendant of stone ; portions of a necklace ; several perfectly round stone balls, of various colours, measuring from half an inch to three inches in diameter, some still preserving their original polish ; a finely-polished oval ornament of jet, an inch and a quarter in length, and three quarters of an inch thick ; a white flint arrow-head, and a dozen of flint flakes ; upwards of 100 white sea-pebbles, and 60 others of different shades of colour. Of sea-shells, 155 were in a tolerably perfect state of preservation, and 110 others in a partially broken state.

Seven specimens of iron were found—viz., an open ring, half an inch in diameter ; one-half of another, somewhat larger ; two pieces, each about an inch long, and a quarter of an inch thick, of uncertain use ; one thin piece, three quarters of an inch long, and half an inch broad, probably a portion of a knife or of a saw ; one piece, an inch and a half long, presenting all the appearance of being the leg of a compass ; and, lastly, an iron punch, or pick, five inches long, with chisel-shaped point. A compass must have been, and indeed was, used for the very fine and high style of art exhibited in the ornamentation of the bone-flakes, while a metallic pick was evidently the tool used in the execution of the comparatively rude and barbaric sculpturings on the carved chamber-stones.

Of bronze were found an ornamented pin, two and a half inches long, still preserving a beautiful green polish ; six open rings, varying from a quarter to three quarters of an inch in diameter ; a portion of another, which is hollow, and formed by the overlapping of a thin plate of bronze ; and portions of eight other small rings in a less perfect state.

Of glass were obtained three small beads, of different shapes, and various shades of colour ; two fragments of coloured glass ; a curious molten drop, an inch long, trumpet-shaped at one end, and tapering towards the other extremity.

Seven small beads of amber were collected, the largest scarcely a quarter of an inch in diameter ; and another small oblong bead of uncertain material.

Of rude pottery were found upwards of 170 portions of broken urns, the fragments varying in size from one to thirty square inches, very imperfectly fired, but much blackened, particularly on the inside surface and round the lip. Some slightly-raised ridges are the only attempts at ornamentation on any of them ; and two pieces contain holes for suspension—probably the first specimens of urns of this class yet discovered in ancient interments in Ireland.

A most singular and unique collection of worked bone implements has been here, for the first time, brought to light. Mr. Conwell has collected and deposited in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy 4071 fragments of plain worked bone implements; 108 others, nearly perfect, and closely resembling in shape the first knives of Scandinavia; 60 fragments, in which the bony substance is little decomposed, and still retains the original polish; 27 fragments, which appear to have been stained; 11 others, plain, and perforated for suspension, by a single hole near the end; 503 fragments, ornamented with rows of fine transverse and parallel lines; 91 bone implements, engraved, principally with a compass, and in a very high order of art, with circles, curves, and punctured ornamentations, twelve of which are decorated on both sides, and on one, in cross-hatch lines, is the representation of a stag, being the only attempt in the collection to depict any living thing; 13 combs, seven of which are engraved on both sides, the heads only remaining, and a small portion of the teeth. In all, Mr. Conwell has collected of these worked bone flakes the large number of 4884!

The collection also includes several bone pins, one ornamented, and still retaining a metallic rivet for holding on a head; and a bone dagger, seven inches long, and nearly an inch broad, but of very rude workmanship.

Of human remains there were found several dozen of human teeth, in a good state of preservation; 6 portions of human jaws, with the teeth still remaining; 48 portions of human skulls, but not one entire; several limb-bones and shoulder-blades; upwards of 2000 fragments of human bones, nearly all charred, and found intermixed with pieces of charcoal.

Mr. Conwell has not yet completed his researches on the Loughcrew hills; but, so far as he has gone, archæologists may well consider it "a virgin find;" and it is certainly one of the most startling and comprehensive made by any antiquary of modern times.

Not having had sufficient time at his disposal to devote to the *rubbing* of so many inscribed stones as he has here, for the first time, brought to light, Mr. Conwell urged upon his friend, G. V. Du Noyer, Esq., M.R.I.A., an eminent antiquarian Irish artist, to make *drawings* of the various hieroglyphics they contained; and these admirably-executed sketches were exhibited by Mr. Du Noyer on the occasion.